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CURRENT STATUS REPORT: PIGEON CONTROL

C. Doug Mampe
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My topic is Pigeon control; and because most of you have had some bird control experience, I'm not going to review all the basic concepts that are associated with bird control today. Rather I will skim over them lightly and then tell you how we organize most of our Pigeon control programs, recognizing that that's one approach and that some situations require much different approaches.

Some of the things that apply to Pigeon control may apply to other types of bird control, but some are unique. When we get called on a Pigeon control job, the first thing we attempt to do is determine what is the problem. Is the problem birds feeding, loafing, or roosting in an area? How many birds are we dealing with? The nature of the problem will determine the type of control techniques that can be best employed.

What are the various control approaches that you might consider? One is mechanical exclusion, and this applies primarily to situations where Pigeons are roosting. We like to recommend mechanical exclusion to our customers when it's appropriate. However, it is generally very costly, at least for the initial treatment; and when you talk about a cost of several thousand dollars, most customers simply say, "We don't want to spend that much money. How can you do it for us in a less costly manner?" Even though you try to explain to them that mechanical exclusion is generally a permanent-type solution to certain situations, they still look at that initial cost and generally would prefer to go with a less expensive form of control if it's possible.

Trapping, of course, is another means of Pigeon control. It's not practiced much in this country, certainly not by our organization, simply because it's too expensive. There are a lot of man hours involved in trapping, pre-baiting, setting traps, and checking traps on a regular basis. Except for unusual situations, the customers find it difficult to justify the expense of trapping.

Where Pigeons are feeding in an area and their very presence during feeding is the problem, simply removing the food or otherwise making it unavailable or unattractive to the Pigeons is a means of control. This, in particular, might relate to rail sidings where there's grain spillage; but again you're often faced with a problem where food cannot be removed on an economical basis. If you have non-paved areas, it's difficult to pick up food or otherwise make it unattractive; and it takes a lot of customer cooperation, which you generally do not get. We generally don't consider removal of food as a number one means of Pigeon control, although it has its place. Sometimes it's used to supplement other control programs, particularly where you're trying to bait pigeons in a slightly different area from where they're used to feeding. Removing their present food, source will encourage them to accept bait.

We've used repellents: the sticky-type repellents that can be placed on roosting areas. We don't use repellents very often for a number of reasons. One is that most of them are not very permanent. You get hot weather, and they run; and you can end up with disfiguration of a building. In cold weather they get brittle. In dusty areas, and we operate in the industrial areas on the east coast, deposits from the air quickly render them ineffective as repellents. If you miss even a small portion of the areas the Pigeons are utilizing for roosting, they simply move to the untreated area. At times we use repellents to move Pigeons from areas where we have difficulty in controlling them to an area that's more favorable for other control techniques. But again we seldom use repellents as a prime control tool when dealing with Pigeons.

Finally we get to the toxicants, which are our main Pigeon control tool. The problems with toxicants of course is that they are hazardous, if used improperly, to the applicator, to other persons in the area, and of course to non-target species, if such are present in the area. Toxicants usually result in the kill of birds. Whether it be a low percentage or approaching 100%, the question you must ask is will the customer accept that kind of a program? And finally, can you get the Pigeons to accept your bait material in the area where you choose to put it out?

Of course, there is the Rid-a-Bird perch. We've used that occasionally for Pigeon control, but it is not a primary tool in our company; we do use it for the other bird species.

The two baits that are readily available are strychnine and Avitrol. Our company uses Avitrol exclusively as a bait material, rather than strychnine, simply because we've found it to be as effective. In situations where you want kill, we can get kill with Avitrol; and in situations where you want very low kill, if we control it properly, we can accomplish that. So Avitrol has become our number one bait material for Pigeon control. We use it on whole corn simply to minimize the hazards to non-target bird species, since most of the smaller birds will not accept whole corn. We do, of course, have to be concerned about Mourning Doves in the area, and even in industrial situations on the east coast you quite frequently have doves coming into an industrial facility and feeding on spilled grain.

We like to bait off the ground if at all possible, simply to minimize the exposure of the treated grain to people, pets, or whatever. Quite a few people will scavenge spilled grain from areas and take it off for whatever use -- we don't know -- and for that reason we do not like to put Avitrol-treated grain on the ground. We generally can get pigeons to feed on a flat roof or some other low area that's off the ground 8 to 15 feet with proper pre-baiting. That is not always the case with other birds, particularly sparrows; but with Pigeons we've had reasonable success in getting them to feed off the ground.

Pre-baiting, we feel, is the most important part of our program; and to put out an Avitrol mixture before the majority or the entire flock is feeding on your pre-bait generally results in less than adequate control. Now the question always arises on how long do you have to pre-bait, and you really can't tell that. You can make some educated guesses. The further removed the bait is from the normal feeding site of the pigeon, generally the longer it takes to pre-bait and get the pigeons feeding in the area that you have chosen. We like to allow two weeks of pre-baiting to get good acceptance at our baiting site; but when we're pricing the job, we have to consider what is the maximum amount of time that we're likely to spend there and build that into the price. We like to check our sites daily. When we are getting good acceptance, and that might be as little as two or three days of pre-baiting, we are then ready to use an Avitrol mixture. When we are pre-baiting we are using whole corn identical to that we will use with the Avitrol.

The mixture that you use when you put out the Avitrol will depend on the situation you've encountered and how quickly you want results. If we are in the situation where the customer or we feel it is advisable to minimize the number of downed birds, then we start with a 30:1 mixture. And if you've pre-baited properly and if you've put your bait out properly, you can usually accomplish control with this mixture. We'll step the concentration up as we go along (and I'll explain that), but you can generally accomplish control with few if any visible downed birds. I'm not saying there are not any downed birds or any kill. I'm sure that there are on occasions, but they're not very visible; and you don't end up with lots of demonstrating birds on the ground.

We generally feed the 30:1 mixture for a week. At the end of one week we will switch to a 20:1 mixture, and in most situations we have moved the flock. However, sometimes you get stragglers, and sometimes you haven't even moved a significant portion of the flock. I can't explain these so-called failures, probably because we don't understand the birds' behavior well enough. At the end of two weeks if we still have birds present, then we will go to a 10:1 mixture. And then we will usually try to sell a maintenance contract on Pigeon control. And we will maintain the area with a 10:1 mixture or a 5:1 mixture, which means monthly visits to the facility, removing uneaten bait, and replacing it with fresh bait at a 10:1 or 5:1 mixture.

Now, if we're in a situation where the customer isn't concerned with kill and it's a rather isolated situation, and we're not going to have the neighbors on the adjoining properties -- now when I say "neighbors" I'm talking about industrial situations not residential situations -- and if the public doesn't have the general access to this area, and you can tolerate a large number of downed birds, then we'll simply go in with the first baiting with a 10:1 and sometimes a 5:1 mixture. We will get a significant kill. We'll also get much quicker results. So it depends entirely on the situations that you're facing and what will be acceptable and not acceptable to the customer and the public in that area.

One thing we don't do in Pigeon control is guarantee 100% control. We have found through experience that you generally have a couple of birds that hang around for one reason or another. Particularly when you have a flock of 100 or more birds, we've found it very difficult to totally eliminate birds from the area; but generally in industrial and commercial situations, if you can get the population down to where you have less than

half a dozen birds, that is acceptable. To guarantee 100% control puts yourself in an untenable position, and the customer may come back to you at a later date and say, "You guaranteed 100% control, and you've not achieved it." And there's really not a great deal that you can do about it. At least we've not been able to do anything about it.

When you're setting up a baiting program, you have to have some coordination with the customer. You would like to be able to bait during quiet hours, when there are few if any people in the area. As soon as you start putting out quantities of grain and feeding pigeons, somebody wants to know what you're doing. You also have to have cooperation with the customer when it relates to pick-up of downed birds. You often will end up at least with a few downed birds, even with the 30:1 mixture. It's impractical to have your own people present 16-20 hours a day to pick up downed birds in the area, so we try to work out arrangements with the customer that we will appear on the scene at a given time during the day to check the bait and put out more bait if necessary. The customer will be responsible for picking up downed birds during the time when your people are not present on the site. But something to remember is that even if the customer picks up the downed birds, ultimately they are your responsibility, particularly in the eyes of regulatory agencies. In many states you do need permits to control even Pigeons. This is true in Maryland; and there the Fish and Wildlife Division holds our people responsible for downed birds, even though we have worked out an arrangement with the customer to pick them up. So you as the PCO hold the ultimate responsibility for what happens at that control site.

We do try to sell a maintenance program, because when you encounter bird situations, especially in industrial and commercial situations, the birds are there because something has attracted them. There may be other convenient roosting sources, food sources, or water, but for some reason they find that area attractive. When you remove the birds that are present, it's only a matter of time before additional birds come back into the area; and by using a maintenance program, we can prevent a build-up of the population.

I have a few slides illustrating one control situation that we did about a year ago, and it has some of these parameters in it that I've discussed. I'd like to show you how one particular Pigeon control problem was approached. Of course this was a successful job, or I wouldn't be showing it to you!

These are the famous Watergate apartments in Washington, D.C. These are high-rise, luxury apartments. You're seeing but one building; there are three or four buildings of that type, all interconnected with one another, with a very nice lawn area in the center and some somewhat exclusive shops at street level. Down below they have a very pretty outdoor cafe, and the problem was Pigeons in the cafe area.

The problem here was the feeding activity of the Pigeons. They would come into this area and rest on those awnings, which soon accumulated a considerable build-up of pigeon droppings. They would then hop down to the pavement below and pick up food scraps that the eating customers left. Occasionally they would hop onto the tables and pick up scraps that remained. We weren't talking about a large number of Pigeons at any one time. There probably were never more than a dozen or so Pigeons in that immediate area at any given time, but the local health department came in and somehow arrived at a magic number of six. If you have more than six Pigeons, you then have a health problem. The day they came there were more than six Pigeons, so they issued an order that there would be some kind of bird control done. So we were called.

So, now we have a problem with Pigeons feeding in an area; and the question is, how do you get rid of the Pigeons? Obviously, if we chose to bait, it wouldn't be practical to bait in that particular area, because you have people active there throughout the day. At one point we considered baiting early in the morning and then picking up the bait. But watching the Pigeons feeding activity during the day led us to believe that different Pigeons were coming in at different times of the day. So if we baited early in the morning, we would affect a portion of the Pigeons causing the problem, but we would not have a control program that would be satisfactory. So we ruled out the possibility of baiting in that immediate area.

The next question is, where are the Pigeons coming from and can we do something to them in that area? We surveyed this whole area; we watched Pigeons flying in and out of that cafe area for a couple of hours. We thought perhaps Pigeons were roosting in the ornate work on the balconies, but after exploring it very carefully we could find no evidence of this. We went up on to the roof. We could find no evidence of Pigeons roosting or even loafing up there during the day. But we did find that Pigeons were roosting on a ledge that occurred in two different areas. A concrete ledge where the top is recessed approximately one foot was an ideal place for Pigeons to roost; and in fact when

we discovered that this was the roost, we found out that there were some 350-400 Pigeons roosting in this area; and the entire side of the building was stained from droppings. There were droppings on the sidewalk below at the entrance to the Watergate Hotel, and it's surprising that nobody complained about pigeon droppings in that area. All they were concerned about were the Pigeons feeding in the cafe area.

This ledge, and one identical to it on the opposite site of the same building, were where all the Pigeons were roosting as best we could determine. The question was, could we treat the Pigeons in that area? A lower balcony which runs between the buildings is fenced off, so the occupants of the building do not have access to it. So we decided to pre-bait in that area and see if we could get the Pigeons, which were roosting only 10 or 20 feet away, to feed. And we did succeed. Within about five days we had Pigeons feeding; and in 10 days we had, as far as we could tell, excellent bait acceptance of whole corn on that balcony area. We used to service this at about 5:30 in the morning before there was any activity, because we had to put a ladder up and climb up onto the balcony from ground level. We serviced it early, so no one really was aware of what was going on. After 10 days, we went in with a 30:1 mixture of Avitrol; and we ran that for 2 weeks, because the last thing we wanted here was a downed bird. The Watergate Management Corporation had their people out patrolling in the morning. After we baited in the morning a man would stay for one hour, because generally birds came in to the feeding site, and it was more likely you'd find downed birds then than somewhat later in the day.

We never did see a downed bird. I believe the Watergate Management Corporation people did pick up one dead bird near the swimming pool. It was hard to tell whether that was affected by Avitrol or not, but I suspect it was.

So we baited with 30:1 for two weeks. At that time we counted about 20 pigeons in the area, and we then shifted directly to a 10:1 mixture. At this point in time we have, I think, the best control that we're going to get. We still have a couple of Pigeons. Apparently Pigeons come in--and we do have a maintenance program going here now -- and they are in the area for several days. They eventually find the bait, and the Pigeons disappear. And then a few more come in. I'm sure you're going to see Pigeons on occasion whenever you visit this facility, but we've eliminated the problem of Pigeons feeding in the cafe area. This program has been going on for about eight months now. The health department has inspected it, and apparently we have resolved the problem to their satisfaction.

So this is just one example of how we would look at a Pigeon problem and the various factors we had to consider. Could we bait them? Where could we bait them? We had to minimize the number of downed birds in this particular situation for public relations reasons. We thought Watergate already had enough publicity, and we didn't need Western's name associated with it.

Very briefly, that's how we handle Pigeon jobs. I know that there are a lot of different situations that require different control techniques, but I would say the majority of our Pigeon jobs are handled very much in this manner.

DISCUSSION

- Shoaf: I'd like to ask a question about Mourning Doves. Have you had any experiences with doves feeding on the roofs where they would take the grain on the roof the same as they would on the ground?
- Mampe: We have not had any situations where we've been aware that doves were feeding on the roof tops. We have encountered situations where doves were feeding in the area we wished to bait, but this was always at ground level.
- Shoaf: Could you use bran or french-fried potatoes or something of that type for sparrows, and would the doves be heading for that?
- Mampe: I don't know that those mixtures are registered for sparrows, and I'm not sure that we'd get bait acceptance anyway. Gene has a comment on that.

- Meester: In our area we have a great many doves and a great many grain elevators. We've found that doves do not go up on roofs. They like to stay on the wires, and they feed almost exclusively on the ground. The one thing that we had a problem with one time was when one of our people ran out of whole kernel corn and put cracked corn on the roof. We had a strong wind, the cracked corn blew off the roof and onto the ground, and we had some downed doves. We corrected it by saying that only whole kernel corn may be used in grain elevators when doves are present in the area.
- Mampe: There are some situations where we've had doves present when we wanted to bait; and we've simply found no practical way to bait and keep the doves from feeding on it. So we've had to consider other control techniques.
- Shoaf: I've got one more question. Do you feel that you could give 95% control when you submit a proposal for bird control or Pigeon control in any industrial setting?
- Mampe: I think in our experience with Pigeons, we could say 95% and we could live with that very comfortably. There will be situations where we're going to have to do a little extra work to get that 95%, but I think we can achieve that in most situations.
- Shoaf: Do you, in explaining to the customer, indicate that 95% means that you're going to control the present flock that's there, because birds will be coming in and you can expect to see some.
- Mampe: Right.
- Knote: When you were getting the maximum acceptance of pre-bait, you said you felt that you had approximately 350 pigeons present. How much whole kernel corn were you getting taken in the pre-bait?
- Mampe: When we start a job like this, we usually try to estimate how much bait the birds might be taking. And then as the birds begin to accept the pre-bait, we want to achieve a situation where the birds are taking nearly all of the bit, but not quite all of it. We feel that if you run out of the bait, that's detracting from your pre-baiting program. We like to figure about a 100 pound sack of whole corn for 100 pigeons, and I think that's really more than you need. But we would rather have more and not run out of bait during pre-baiting.
- Knote: In other words, that 100 pound sack would not go for the 2-week period of time that you were pre-baiting?
- Mampe: No, that wouldn't go for the two weeks. You might use a third or maybe even as much as half of that in one day if you had 200 birds present - once you're getting good acceptance.
- Shoaf: Then, wouldn't you have to pre-bait at least once every week?
- Mampe: When we start pre-baiting, we're there everyday until we see how bait acceptance is going. In some situations we feel we can put out enough bait where we can go every other day. But in the initial three or four days, we like to go back everyday to determine how much bait is being accepted. You can get a feel for what kind of acceptance you're getting. Now I think others probably put out more bait and then don't visit it for four days or six days. Maybe we're making a mistake from a commercial standpoint in doing it the way we're doing, because we're actually running up our labor costs somewhat; But we don't have enough confidence at this point to say we're going to put out X pounds of grain and come back in a week to see what's happened. We like to visit these sites on a daily basis.
- Harrison: I'd like to add a little emphasis to that. I do all the bird control for the Air Force -- or at least talk to PCOs about how to control birds. Our guys call us and say, "Avitrol doesn't work and it's never worked." We hear this quite a bit, and we've heard it quite a bit in talking to some of you folks around here, too. And in every single case you can show that it's a case of pre-baiting. You've got to make a good case of pre-baiting, and you've got to do it every single day - almost at the same time in some cases with Pigeons.

In one of our Air Force bases we've got something like 6,000 pigeons in three or four hangers. We pre-baited every single day; it took almost three weeks before they found the grain the first time. We got them on the grain and then went to 30:1 and eliminated our problems. But the thing is that pre-baiting is more important than anything else you do. So when you cost out your labor, you'd better cost out on a daily basis.

Mampe: I appreciate those comments. You made one other comment which I overlooked, and that's pre-baiting at the same time everyday, which is something we try to do. The Pigeons get used to bait coming in. They get used to an individual being present in that area: and if something's changed, if you've baited at 5:30 every morning and you come in one morning at 10 o'clock, the Pigeons are totally confused at that point. Something is changed in the pattern, and you've decreased your bait acceptance; and you really have to start building it up again. So we like to set a particular time each day, and we like to have our man there at that time everyday of the week.

shoaf: We have found in an industrial steel mill that we could go in at a certain time of the day, and they'd be sitting there waiting for you to start putting the grain out. As soon as you put the grain out, they'll come right down and start eating. You can get tremendous control. I've been using Avitrol ever since it came on the market; and I've never had a failure yet, where we couldn't give them at least 95% control.

Benschoter: I had one comment to make and that is it might be helpful to point out that not only the same individual and the same time but also the same gear or apparel is important. If you have somebody come in with a T-shirt one day and the next day with a fuzzy overcoat, a big hat, and everything else, that is another item which tends to upset the acceptance.

Mampe: That's a good point. Our people all use the same uniform, so that doesn't tend to be a problem; but it is a good point.

Question: What happens to the pigeons? When you use the 5:1 and 10:1 mixture, I know you're going to get 100% mortality. But when you use the 30:1 mixture, how many kernels of Avitrol-treated corn does it take to eliminate a Pigeon?

Mampe: If I remember the figures right, I think one kernel will probably not do it. Two to three kernels will probably give you kill.

Question: If a Pigeon eats two or three kernels, and it takes a while to affect the bird, do you think that in time the Pigeon could fly two or three miles away and die there, and this is why you don't have the mortality on the site?

Mampe: I think that's very possible. I think, also, particularly when you're using 30:1 mixtures and you want to minimize downed birds, you've got to mix your bait very thoroughly and spread it. If you end up with little piles of Avitrol-treated grain, each bird gets a lethal dose even though you're feeding on a 30:1 mixture. I would think that if a bird does take only one treated kernel he may well move away from that area before he's affected. I don't know, quite frankly, what happens to all the birds when they disappear from the area. Whether we've had a high kill or whether it's simply been a low kill and they've moved to other areas, I don't have an answer for that.

Banschoter: Would there be some surface that would be more attractive to pigeons as far as spreading out the grain? Would a gunny sack or something of that nature be more of an attraction?

Mampe: We've always tried to spread the grain on whatever natural surface exists—a rooftop or whatever soil. We've tried feeding stations and aluminum, pie pans, and other such devices, and generally we've had very poor bait acceptance with them. So we've tried to use the natural surface as it exists.

Question: You mentioned that strychnine and Avitrol are used for Pigeon control. When do you use strychnine?

- Mampe: We don't use strychnine. If we used strychnine at all, it would be simply a case where you want kill. In most of our cases, we're more interested in removing the problem than in a kill. In fact, most times we'd rather not have a significant kill because of the P.R. problems.
- Beck: To carry your thought on, Doug, the primary purpose for Avitrol in a commercial company is that you're dealing with an individual who will pay you for your services; and he's not paying you for your services to kill all the birds in the city of Columbus, Ohio, for instance. He is concerned about the birds on his plant or his Air Force base, or whatever it happens to be. If your purpose is area bird control, whether you're a health department official or someone concerned with that kind of problem, then strychnine becomes the tool of choice rather than Avitrol. So where you're having to reduce large numbers of Pigeons over a wide area, I think you're going to find that strychnine would be the preferred tool from that standpoint. But Doug's whole orientation is from that of a commercial operation, and I think he's correct that he's got a responsibility to his customer. If he can solve that customer's problem with the least amount of adverse public reaction, that's really what he wants.
- Question: What's the advantage of strychnine over Avitrol 5:1?
- Beck: A lot of it is where you want them killed. A lot of it is relative efficiency. Strychnine will kill quicker. As a general rule it gives a higher mortality. You're not going to repel too many birds from the area. Actually one of the primary purposes of Avitrol in most operations is the repellent effect with a minimum amount of mortality. Even at 5:1, you're not going to get much more than 60% mortality in area bird control. Whereas with strychnine, you should get over 85% mortality. Now, I'm just giving you general run-of-the mill figures.
- Fitzwater: Concluding Statement

I think Doug made three points that I always like to talk about in bird control. The first is a good survey, so you know what you're dealing with, what your problems are, where your control areas are going to be.

The next is to stick to a pattern; birds are not that smart, and if you follow the same routine -- wear the same clothes, feed the same time -- you can build up an acceptance.

Finally, bird control is a public relations problem. You need to get rid of the dead ones. I remember when I killed some sparrows in Logansport once; and I was going down the street with a bucket picking up sparrows and throwing them in, and some lady with a kid came over to me to see what I was doing. She turned, horrified, and really ducked out. It's just something you've got to play really low key, because people don't like to see birds being killed.